The Second Coming

POEM TEXT

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of ***Spiritus Mundi***
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

SUMMARY

Flying around and around in a widening spiral, a falcon can no longer hear the call of its owner. Things are breaking down, and their foundation is giving way. Pure destruction and lawlessness have spread across the world, and so has a tidal wave darkened by blood. All the rituals of innocence have been swallowed by this tide. The best people aren't motivated to act, but the worst people are impassioned and eager.

Some kind of revelation has to happen soon, and the Second Coming itself must be close. Excitedly, the speaker exclaims: "The Second Coming!" But just as the speaker says this, a vision comes to the speaker from the world's collective unconscious. The speaker sees a barren desert land, where a creature with a man's head and a lion's body is coming to life. Its expression is, like the sun, empty and without pity. Its legs are moving slowly, and all around it fly the shadows of disturbed desert birds. Everything becomes dark again, but the speaker knows something new: two thousand years of calm have been irreversibly disrupted by the shaking of a cradle. The speaker asks: what beast, whose time has finally come, is dragging itself towards Bethlehem, where it will be born.

THEMES

CIVILIZATION, CHAOS, AND CONTROL

"The Second Coming" presents a nightmarish apocalyptic scenario, as the speaker describes human beings' increasing loss of control and tendency towards violence and anarchy. Surreal images fly at the reader thick and fast, creating an unsettling atmosphere that suggests a world on the brink of destruction.

Yet for all its metaphorical complexity, "The Second Coming" actually has a relatively simple message: it basically predicts that time is up for humanity, and that civilization as we know it is about to be undone. Yeats wrote this poem right after World War I, a global catastrophe that killed millions of people. Perhaps it's unsurprising, then, that the poem paints a bleak picture of humanity, suggesting that civilization's sense of progress and order is only an illusion.

With the above in mind, the first stanza's challenging imagery starts to make more sense. The "falconer," representing humanity's attempt to control its world, has lost its "falcon" in the turning "gyre" (the gyre is an image Yeats uses to symbolize grand, sweeping historical movements as a kind of spiral). These first lines could also suggest how the modern world has distanced people from nature (represented here by the falcon). In any case, it's clear that whatever connection once linked the metaphorical falcon and falconer has broken, and now the human world is spiraling into chaos.

Indeed, the poem suggests that though humanity might have *looked* like it was making progress over the past "twenty centuries"—via seemingly ever-increasing knowledge and scientific developments, for example—the First World War proved people to be as capable of self-destruction as ever. "Anarchy" was "loosed upon the world," along with tides of blood (which clearly evoke the mass death of war). "Innocence" was just a "ceremony," now "drowned." The "best" people lack "conviction," which suggests they're not bothering to do anything about this nightmarish reality, while the "worst" people seem excited and eager for destruction. The current state of the world, according to the speaker, proves that the "centre"—that is, the foundation of society—was never very strong.

In other words, humanity's supposed arc of progress has been

an illusion. Whether the poem means that humanity has lost its way or never knew it to begin with is unclear, but either way the promises of modern society—of safety, security, and human dignity—have proven empty. And in their place, a horrific creature has emerged—a grotesque perversion of the "Second Coming" promised by Christianity, during which Jesus Christ is supposed to return to the earth and invite true believers to heaven. *This* Second Coming is clearly not Jesus, but instead a "rough beast" that humanity itself has woken up (perhaps, the first stanza implies, by the incessant noise of its many wars).

With this final image of the beast, the poem indicates that while humanity *seemed* to get more civilized in the 2,000 years that followed Christ's birth, in reality people have been sowing the seeds of their own destruction all along. This "rough beast" is now "pitilessly" slouching toward the birthplace of Jesus—likely in order to usher in a new age of "darkness" and "nightmare."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-13
- Lines 13-17
- Lines 18-22

MORALITY AND CHRISTIANITY

"The Second Coming" offers an unsettling take on Christian morality, suggesting that it is not the stable and reliable force that people believe it to be. The poem clearly alludes to the biblical Book of Revelation from the start, in which, put simply, Jesus returns to Earth to save the worthy. According to the Bible, this is meant to happen when humanity reaches the end times: an era of complete war, famine, destruction and hatred. The poem suggests that the end times are already happening, because humanity has lost all sense of morality—and perhaps that this morality was only an illusion to begin with.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes the chaos, confusion, and moral weakness that have caused "things" to "fall apart." In the second, the poem makes it clear that it's a specifically Christian morality that is being undone. In describing this wide-ranging destruction, the poem asks whether Christian morality was built on weak foundations in the first place—that is, perhaps humanity was never really moral, but just pretended to be.

The first stanza's imagery develops this sense of morality being turned upside down: good and evil (the "best" and "worst") are no longer the reliable categories that they once were, replaced by "mere anarchy" ("mere" means something like "pure" here). Humanity has drenched itself in blood—the "blood-dimmed tide"—suggesting that morality was only ever a "ceremony," a performance that conjured the illusion that humankind was "innocent."

What's more, the poem suggests that no one—not even Jesus—can remedy this bleak reality. The biblical Book of Revelation predicts a kind of final reckoning in which people essentially get what they deserve based on their moral behavior and religious virtues; it indicates that Jesus will come to save those who are worthy of being saved. But "The Second Coming" offers no such comfort.

Instead, in the first line of the second stanza the poem hints that a moment of divine intervention must be at hand after the chaos of the first stanza ("surely some revelation is at hand"). And, as it turns out, "some revelation" *is* at hand. But rather than returning the world to peace, this new revelation makes things *worse:* a new and grotesque beast heads toward Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, to be brought into the world. If Jesus was the figurehead for a moral movement, this new beastly leader is the figurehead of a new world of "anarchy," in which the "best" people (likely the most moral people) lack the courage of their convictions and the "worst" are allowed to thrive. In other words, the poem portrays Christian morality and prophecy as weak, or even proven false, in the face of the violence and destruction that humans have created.

The "blank gaze" of this new creature provides further evidence of just how hopeless the situation is. This being might have the head of a "man," but it doesn't have moral sense—instead, it is "pitiless." It is arriving to preside over "blood-dimmed tide[s]" and "drowned' "innocence"—not a world of kindness, charity, and justice. Its sphinx-like appearance is also deliberately at odds with Christian imagery, which further suggests a break with Christian morality. Meanwhile, the "*Spiritus Mundi*" mentioned by the poem is what Yeats thought of as the world's collective unconscious, from which the poet could draw insight. This vision of the beast, then, is suggestive of a *worldwide* shift into "anarchy," as the collective mind of humanity lets go of morality.

"The Second Coming" is a deeply ambiguous poem. Indeed, Yeats revised specific cultural references *out* of the poem before its publication. But there's no mistaking that this is a bleak vision of the future of humankind, one which presents morality as a kind of collective dream that is now turning into a nightmare.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

The poem opens with a mysterious metaphor: a "falconer" searches for his lost falcon within a "widening gyre." The bird itself can't hear the falconer, perhaps because of the way that the surroundings are "widening."

Here, it's important to know a little bit about Yeats's "System" of seeing the world (outlined in his book *A Vision*). He conceived of history as a kind of movement of "gyres," which are shapes like cone spirals or vortexes. According to Yeats, each phase of history is in contrary motion against the next, in a dimension that is essentially beyond the limits of human understanding. The poem conceives of the 20th century as the point when one gyre of history—the "twenty centuries" of Christianity and "progress"—gives way to another. This new era is altogether harder to define, but it looks ominous. The image of the falconer—the human—losing control over his environment (represented by the "falcon") symbolizes this shift from one phase of history to the next.

Both opening lines use close repetition of words to create a sense of disorientation, as the falcon turns repeatedly in search of its master. The diacope of "turning" and the polyptoton of "falcon and "falconer" suggests repeated and increasingly desperate movement. The heavy /n/ consonance contributes to this effect too:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

The speaker's tone is notably measured and detached in the opening, suggesting little of the nightmarish vision to come in the second stanza. That said, the poem has now introduced its central premise of a loss of control, and though the poem's meaning is ambiguous, it seems likely that this loss of control is humanity's over its civilizations.

LINES 3-6

> *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*
> *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*
> *The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*
> *The ceremony of innocence is drowned;*

The much-quoted line 3 expands on the first two lines' image of a loss of control. "Things"—a collective noun that is deliberately vague—are "falling apart." "The centre cannot hold" suggests that these "things" are truly on the verge of collapse, as though the ties that keep reality itself together are being loosened.

Already, there is a tension here between the title and the poem's content. The "Second Coming" usually refers to Jesus's return to the earth, when he will fulfill prophecies made about him in religious scripture (such as the biblical Book of Revelation, which this poem draws from). His return is supposed to be an act of salvation that comes once humanity has reached the end times—a devastating apocalyptic era in which the world is ruled by evil. However, the bleak present tense descriptions in this first stanza give little suggestion that such a hero is coming—and, indeed, it is this idea of a savior that the poem turns on its head in the second stanza.

Lines 4 through 6 provide more detail about what it looks like when "Things fall apart. "Mere" (pure) "anarchy" has now been let loose "upon the world," along with a "blood-dimmed tide," an image that may allude to the Book of Revelation. Given that this poem was written shortly after the end of World War I—which killed millions of people—it's likely that this "tide" refers to the bloody consequences of human violence and hatred.

After the caesura that follows "loosed" in line 5, the speaker connects this "blood-dimmed tide"—and everything that has come so far in the poem—to a loss of "innocence." Perhaps this innocence relates to naive beliefs about civilization, progress, and morality—particularly the idea that humanity is by and large on an upwards trajectory in which things get *better*. In fact, the line calls into question whether or not this innocence ever really existed, suggesting it was a "ceremony"—a kind of show or illusion rather than a sincere commitment to the world's goodness.

LINES 7-8

> *The best lack all conviction, while the worst*
> *Are full of passionate intensity.*

The final two lines of the first stanza—which is technically one long sentence—draw an antithesis between the "best" and the "worst." These opposites are described (somewhat ambiguously) in relation to what the poem has described so far. They seem to be either part of what has caused "mere anarchy" or further effects of whatever *is* causing this historical shift.

The mention of "conviction" and "passionate intensity" makes it clear that this antithesis refers specifically to people (because these are human traits). The "best" people lack the courage of their convictions in the face of the looming collapse, while the "worst" are in their element. Though the poem does not specify what makes people the "best" or the "worst," it seems likely that the antithesis relates to a kind of moral integrity, given that words like "anarchy" and "blood-dimmed" tide have previously suggested societal disintegration and mass death. Though the poem was written well before the onset of World War II, it's hard not to think of Adolf Hitler when reading line 8.

By the end of the first stanza, the poem has created a complicated and ambiguous picture through language that is actually quite simple and powerful. It's easy enough to understand what the poem is saying in a literal sense, but it's a lot harder to pin down what exactly it *means*. There are two central points to consider here. First of all, Yeats believed that symbolism could be used in a way that didn't require explanation or interpretation. The structural integrity of the symbols and images—that is, how well they hang together—generates truths that can be *felt* and understood on a subconscious level, without having their mysteries explained

away. It's likely, then, that Yeats intended the deeper meanings of this stanza's vivid imagery to remain somewhat ambiguous.

Additionally, the poem's subject is, for want of a better word, *huge*. It's talking about the entirety of humanity and thousands of years of history. So it makes sense that the poem doesn't tie itself too explicitly to specific historical references; in fact, earlier drafts did mention the Russian Revolution and specific politicians, but Yeats revised these references *out* of the poem. As a result, the poem has the deliberately strange sense of being outside of time, making it feel as relevant to the present day as it was to 1919.

LINES 9-13

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of
Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight:

The start of the second stanza marks an important shift in the poem. While the first eight lines had a detached and measured tone (despite the harrowing subject matter), these next lines are the point at which the speaker becomes more personally involved.

This change begins with the first word of the second stanza. "Surely" is a subjective word, used to intensify an opinion. Here, the speaker is reacting to the list of chaos and confusion presented by the first stanza—almost as though stanza 1 is a news bulletin, and stanza 2 is an individual's response to that news. In light of the awful present described in stanza 1, the speaker almost pleadingly comes to the conclusion that it is high time for "revelation" and/or the "Second Coming."

The "Second Coming" is an event predicted in the biblical Book of Revelation, so the two phrases go hand in hand. In fact, they literally go hand in hand through the poem's use of epistrophe: the repeated "at hand" at the end of each line conveys just how near the speaker feels the revelation/Second Coming is—or, more accurately, how near it *should* be. The terrible state of the world, suggests the speaker, can only mean that the Second Coming will happen soon. But the repeated "hand"—and the anaphora of the repeated "Surelys"—has an air of desperation about it, as though the speaker is afraid that this conclusion might turn out to be false. This anxiety culminates in the exclamation of line 11, with the speaker reaching a kind of fever pitch in a mixture of fear and excitement. The caesura exclamation mark signals this high point.

But just then, the speaker has a vision. Having momentarily dwelt on the idea that the Second Coming is near, an event that will fulfill the prophecies of the Bible and ultimately restore the relationship between God and humanity, the speaker instantly rethinks the belief that this will "surely" happen. Indeed, the vision seems involuntary, as though it has been impressed on the speaker's mind from some external source. The speaker actually names this source: the *Spiritus Mundi*. This is a Latin term that means "world spirit," and it is Yeats's name for a kind of collective unconscious of humanity across the world. Essentially, the speaker is receiving an *alternative* prophecy to the Book of Revelation—or perhaps a prophecy that *corrects* the original one. Yeats did actually believe in this collective store of images and symbols that provided inspiration for poetry, so this moment makes it seem like the speaker may be a stand-in for the poet himself.

In line 13, the poem reveals that it is written from a first-person perspective, with the vision troubling "my sight." In the build-up to this new vision, the poem uses long assonant /a/ sounds to foreshadow the beast's arrival. These vowels have a slow quality suggestive of something coming into life:

> Hardly are those words out
> When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
> Troubles my sight:

Note, however, that the /a/ vanishes in the second half of line 12 and through line 13, as the vision gets clearer. This change in the poem's sounds mirrors the shift in the speaker's emotional experience here, as the beast itself appears and brings a sense of terror with it.

LINES 13-17

somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

From the colon caesura in line 13 until the end of line 17, the speaker describes the vision that arrived from the *Spiritus Mundi*. It is a grotesque and heavily symbolic apparition of a creature coming into life. First, the speaker establishes the location: a non-specified desert ("somewhere"). This evokes an inhospitable landscape, a "somewhere" that might be home to "something" inhuman. The alliterative and consonantal /s/ sounds bring the sound of the desert to life, suggesting winds blowing sand across the landscape:

> Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

Then, the enjambment from line 13 into line 14 allows the creature to suddenly impose itself on the poem, muscling into the reader's view with no punctuation as warning. This creature is a hybrid of a man's head and a lion's body—but it's also just "a shape," a term that gives the vision a deliberate vagueness (similar to "somewhere" in line 13 and "things" in line 3). Note that the speaker doesn't even use the word "beast" until line 21. Describing it here as a "shape" portrays it

as somewhat indistinct—perhaps because it is only just being born—and mysterious.

Notably, the poem doesn't *name* this beast. Of creatures already established in myth and folklore, this one probably most resembles the sphinx or the manticore. Neither has very hopeful connotations, with the sphinx typically portrayed as a merciless monster and the manticore's name literally meaning "man-eater." There's no single way to interpret Yeats's beast, but perhaps it signals the way in which civilization and human progress have been a kind of illusion. The man-head could represent human intellect and potential, but the body—the thing that takes action—is a beast, likely representing humans' tendency toward irrational violence and chaos.

And even if this *is* an intelligent creature, it's still fearsome and merciless. (Indeed, if this is beast is a metaphor for what humankind is becoming, perhaps its strange shape could be interpreted as the ingenious capacity humankind has for coming up with innovative methods for one of its oldest habits: killing). While line 14 gives a sense of the beast's basic physical appearance, line 15 hones in more on its expression as a way of discussing its character. The beast has a "blank" look on its face, as "pitiless as the sun." This suggests that it's cold and unforgiving, incapable of showing empathy—which perhaps ties in with the suggestion of a collapse of morality (stanza 1).

It's also worth noting that the sun isn't usually described as "pitiless"; more often, the sun shows up in poetry as a sign of hope and enlightenment. In part because it sounds like "son," the sun is also frequently used as a symbol of Jesus himself. Through this unusual description, then, the poem may be suggesting that Christ (and perhaps symbols of hope more generally) isn't really a source of strength; Christian morality is useless in this collapsing world.

In lines 16 and 17, the speaker describes how this beast is slowly coming to life, "moving its slow thighs," as though its time has finally come. The consonance of /l/ sounds ("slow," "while," "all," "reel") in these lines reinforces this sense of slow movement. Flying around the beast are "desert birds," and though these birds aren't named specifically either, it's quite possible that they are intended be vultures or similar. If they live in the desert, they're probably the kind of birds that have to scavenge for their food. There's the suggestion, then, that they are present because the rising of the beast heralds a new era of death and destruction (and, for the birds, food!). Their shadowiness adds to the atmosphere of unease and mystery surrounding the vision, as though this prophecy is taking shape in the deepest part of the subconscious mind (and tapping into the "*Spiritus Mundi*").

LINES 18-20

The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

Line 18 marks the end of the speaker's vision. The "darkness" that "drops" describes the beast disappearing from view, but is also more generally suggestive of "darkness" being drawn over humanity as it undergoes this seismic historical shift. The caesura creates a dramatic pause in which the speaker gathers their thoughts and the reader gets a moment to reflect on the vision that's just been described.

The next main shift in the poem comes after this caesura. Having experienced their vision, the speaker now feels they possess new knowledge about the fate of the world. It's here, in line 19, that the poem more explicitly ties itself to the twentieth century, with the phrase "twenty centuries of stony sleep" clearly alluding to the calendar system that starts with the year of Christ's birt.h "Stony sleep" is also a specific allusion to William Blake's *The Book of Urizen*, in which the phrase first appeared. Here, the poem seems to be suggesting that the 2,000 years following the birth of Christ have been a kind of waking dream, which perhaps implies that the ideas that define those two millennia have been in some way illusory. These illusions could be the idea that civilization is on an upward arc of progress, and/or the idea that the moral framework of Christianity gives human life meaning.

But now, this "sleep" has been irreversibly disturbed, "vexed" into a "nightmare." That is, some force has been angered, perhaps by humanity's behavior or perhaps just as part of the natural historical cycle of the "gyres." The poem essentially becomes a prophecy at this point, and part of its power comes from the way its general predictions could apply to many different specific situations. For example, the poem could be read as a kind of subconscious prediction of further global conflict (i.e., World War II), or it could align equally well with 21st century concerns like climate change.

The meter of line 20 supports the image of a rocking cradle gone awry. Though the poem's meter throughout is loose, it's generally organized by iambic pentameter. Here, however, the meter is greatly disrupted to evoke the disturbance of the cradle:

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

Given the evidence provided by the title, the phrase "twenty centuries," and the later mention of Bethlehem, the cradle image here is a clear allusion to the birth of Christ. The Second Coming is meant to be a kind of rebirth, and the cradle indicates that indeed, *something* is being born, but what the poem seems to predict is a far cry from Jesus's heroic homecoming.

LINES 21-22

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

In the poem's final lines, the speaker hints at the future

consequences of the ominous situation that the poem has described so far. Whatever "rough beast" is being awoken here will be the herald of a new era, one inspired by all of the misery and suffering described in the first stanza.

The poem suggests the beast has been waiting a long time to be awoken—"its hour come round at last"—and that it's only *now* that conditions are right for its arrival. All of this amounts to a grotesque perversion of the Christian Second Coming, and though the poem is deeply ambiguous, it seems fair to say that its prediction of the future is far from hopeful. It becomes clear here that this new creature isn't just strange; rather, the beast is "rough"—it's ready for violence (and also roughly formed in its newness).

The poem then ends on a deeply unsettling rhetorical question: what is this beast that "Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" It's not certain whether the poem intends the beast mentioned here as the same one seen in the vision, or whether this is another, even more mysterious beast. But either way, it shares the same slowness of movement (it "Slouches") and "rough" appearance. Bethlehem, of course, is the birthplace of Jesus. Accordingly, this beast is coming specifically to replace or in place of Jesus, signaling an end to Christian values and ways of life (and indicating that those traditions may not have been particularly strong in the first place). The poem suggests that perhaps mankind doesn't get the Second Coming it hopes for, but rather the one it *deserves*.

Assonance in these last two lines again helps to convey the beast's slow but purposeful movement:

> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

These vowels have a long sound that evokes slowness, but they also build relentlessly to the final repetition in the word "born"—the very last word of the poem. The heavy /b/ alliteration ("beast," "Bethlehem," "be," "born"), too, creates the sense of something taking on physical form, as though the "rough beast" is assembling its different body parts.

The poem then ends on a horror movie-style cliff-hanger, as the ominous creature heads towards its own birth. The fact that it's not even born yet (but is nonetheless moving) mirrors the way that Jesus is said to be an incarnation of God, and therefore in a way already existed before his earthly body was born. This creature, it seems, exists on a similar kind of spiritual or universal plane, and is now coming to take on its bodily form. The question mark at the end of line 22 makes the poem conclude on a point of doubt and uncertainty, mirroring the way the very first image of the "widening gyre" suggested one era ending and another beginning.

SYMBOLS

THE FALCON

Yeats places the falcon front and center in the opening lines of the poem to represent humanity's control over the world. The fact that the falcon "cannot hear" its master thus symbolizes a loss of that control.

To understand this symbol better, it's important to know a little bit about falconry more generally. Falconry is a practice that goes back thousands of years, and involves people training birds of prey to follow instructions. This was often for hunting purposes, but is also practiced as a kind of art form. In both instances, the falcon represents humanity exerting a type of intelligent control over the natural world. Killer birds like hawks and falcons are brought under the spell of humans.

The falcon's inability to hear the falconer's call (lines 1 and 2) means that the relationship between them has been severed. This symbolizes chaos and confusion, and specifically gestures towards a breakdown in communication.

The latter of these is especially interesting when considered in the context of World War I. The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which triggered the events that led to global conflict, is thought to have been partly due to his motorcade taking a wrong turn—because the driver had not been given the correct instruction.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The falcon cannot hear the falconer;"

THE BEAST

In lines 11 to 18, the speaker has a vision of a beast. Though the speaker doesn't name the beast specifically, it is described in vivid and unsettling detail. The beast has a "lion body" and the "head of a man." This makes it similar to a sphinx or a manticore, both of which were mythical creatures said to be predatory towards humans. This type of hybrid creature is quite common in various mythologies, and is meant to convey a kind of freakishness, a sense of nature somehow going *wrong*.

With its animal body and human head, perhaps this beast says something about the "nightmare" to come. Though humans have tried to civilize themselves and improve their world, perhaps their more beastly animal nature has only been *hidden*—not defeated.

In other words, the beast might symbolize that civilization itself is a kind of illusion. The human head has a "gaze" that lacks empathy, suggesting that the beast is ready to kill. Given that the poem was written between the two world wars of the 20th

century, this surreal image seems to gesture towards humankind's ever-improving capacity for self-destruction.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-17:** "A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Second Coming" uses alliteration sparingly throughout. It is first used in the opening three lines, with repetition of the /t/ and /f/ sounds:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart;

This opening image is focused on disorientation, and the alliteration furthers the idea of repeated, confused movement. The falcon and the falconer have been separated, neither able to locate the other, and the scattered /f/ sound shows that they can't bridge the gap that separates them.

The next notable example of alliteration comes in line 13, as the speaker describes the vision that came from the *Spiritus Mundi*. The speaker starts by setting the scene, and that's where the alliteration comes in:

> Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

The alliterative /s/ sounds have a sibilant, whispering kind of sound that conjures up the howling winds of an inhospitable desert. This sense of atmosphere makes the beast that turns out to live in the desert seem all the more ominous.

The poem then dials up the alliteration as it draws to its conclusion:

> Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The /r/ sounds link "rocking," "rough," and "round" together, creating an atmosphere of threat and potential violence. The four /b/ sounds in the last two lines build the sense of something taking to shape, as though the beast is growing in strength as the poem comes to its conclusion.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "t"
- **Line 2:** "f," "f"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "f," "th"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "S," "s"
- **Line 10:** "S," "S"
- **Line 11:** "S"
- **Line 13:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 17:** "d"
- **Line 18:** "d," "d," "n," "kn"
- **Line 19:** "c," "s," "s"
- **Line 20:** "r"
- **Line 21:** "r," "b," "r"
- **Line 22:** "B," "b," "b"

ALLUSION

"The Second Coming" is brimming with allusions, some clearer than others. First of all, the title itself alludes to the Christian belief in Jesus's return to the earth. Exactly what this will mean for humanity varies between different branches of Christianity, but generally Jesus's return is supposed to bring about the final judgment in which true Christians will be saved and everyone else will be damned. This is a version of the apocalypse, and it relates to the the final book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation.

Many predictions have been made about the timing of the Second Coming, and literature that looks at end-of-the-world scenarios is called *eschatology*. Before the Second Coming, so the story goes, the earth will be ravaged by war, famine, hatred, and so on. Perhaps, then, these end times are the scenario described in the first stanza—which is the poem's present day and perhaps itself alludes to the catastrophic events of World War I. Looking at this way, the poem is essentially saying that the time is ripe for the Second Coming—but instead of something fundamentally *good* arriving (like Jesus), something even worse is on the horizon.

Additionally, the gyre in the first line is an allusion to Yeats's own belief system, which is a complicated mix of magic, mysticism, and occultism. Put simply, a gyre is a spiral cone shape, and these shapes govern the universe and the different eras of history. The poem places itself at the transition between one gyre and another, showing how the "twenty centuries of stony sleep" since the birth of Christ are shifting on to whatever comes next.

In the second stanza, the speaker has a vision rooted in the "*Spiritus Mundi*," which is Latin for "world spirit." According to Yeats's belief system, this is a kind of collective human unconscious from which poets and others can draw symbols and images. The speaker's mysterious vision is perhaps an allusion as well, to one (or both) of two mythical creatures: the

sphinx and the manticore. Both of these are terrifying beasts, with human heads on lion bodies—and both are evil.

Finally, at the end of the second stanza, the poem makes explicitly clear that Christianity is its principal subject. The "twenty centuries of stony sleep"—the last two words of which are an allusion to the Romantic poet William Blake—tie the poem to the birth of Christ. The "cradle" and the Bethlehem setting confirm this too. All in all, then, the poem alludes strongly to Christian mythology, but it does so in order to subvert it and cast doubt on humanity's future.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gyre"
- **Lines 3-8:** "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."
- **Lines 9-11:** "Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand. / The Second Coming!"
- **Line 12:** "Spiritus Mundi"
- **Lines 13-16:** "somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs,"
- **Lines 19-22:** "That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, / And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

ANTITHESIS

"The Second Coming" is in a way one long antithesis, between what the "Second Coming" is supposed to be and what, according to the speaker's mysterious vision, it actually will be. That is, the Second Coming is traditionally understood to refer to Jesus's return to earth as the savior of the worthy, but the poem indicates that what's actually on its way is a beast that will unravel Christian morality.

The poem contains some other instances of antithesis too. The first one of these is lines 7 and 8. Here the speaker draws a distinction between the "best" and the "worst." Through ascribing a lack of conviction to the former and "passionate intensity" to the latter, the speaker makes it clear that this antithesis refers to people. It describes the political and societal moment of the poem's present, quite possibly gesturing towards the horrors of the First World War (and eerily predicting elements of the Second).

Essentially, this instance of antithesis is talking about how people respond to "Things fall[ing] apart," "mere anarchy," and so on. The people best placed to respond to it do not have the courage of their convictions, while those who are the "worst" get excited about the opportunity to exploit the situation. Though the poem predates his rise, it's hard not to think of Adolf Hitler as one of those passionately intense "worst" people.

Later in the poem, the speaker has a vision. This, too, is a kind of antithesis, though one based in established mythology. The creature that the speaker sees is part-human and part-beast. Indeed, the animal part—the lion body—represents the so-called "king of the beasts." There is therefore an antithesis between human and animal nature, with the suggestion perhaps being that humankind, for all its apparent progress and civilization, is very much still beastly.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."
- **Line 14:** "A shape with lion body and the head of a man,"

ANAPHORA

In the first stanza, four out of eight lines begin with the definite article: "The."

This anaphora serves as part of the first stanza's tone, which is deliberately measured and restrained (in order to set up the sudden onset of the speaker's vision in the second stanza). The first stanza strikes a more objective note than the second stanza, in which the speaker's first-person voice intrudes on the initially established tone. The first stanza is presented as a kind of objective look at the poem's present, with the anaphora making it read almost like a deeply mysterious news bulletin.

Interestingly, the anaphora at the start of the second stanza serves to undo all of the above. There is a definite contrast between the two stanzas, and the anaphora in both helps to make this shift clear. Whereas the anaphora in the first stanza established a measured tone, the repetition of "Surely" at the beginning of lines 9 and 10 introduces the speaker's personality to the poem. "Surely" is a word related to opinion, and these two lines are like the speaker's personal commentary on the first stanza's news bulletin. The speaker, weighing the content of stanza one, thinks that it is "surely" time for the "Second Coming" predicted in the Bible (in books like Revelation). The repetition of "surely" has an air of desperation about it, as though the speaker can't believe that the Second Coming hasn't happened already and is pleading for it to come soon. This heightened emotion sets up the terrifying vision that arrives a few lines later.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 5:** "The "
- **Line 6:** "The"
- **Line 7:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "Surely"

- **Line 10:** “Surely”

ASSONANCE

As with many of Yeats's poems, "The Second Coming" makes effective use of assonance throughout.

Assonance is first used in the very first line. Here, the poem is trying to build an image of confusion based on a falcon and a falconer no longer able to find one another. The small repeated sounds suggest small repeated movements (like turning around in a circle when you don't know which way to go):

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

The next key example of assonance is in lines 11 and 12, when slow vowels in the form of two slightly different /a/ sounds foreshadow the slow-moving beast seen in the speaker's vision:

> Hardly are those words out
> When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Lines 16 to 19 use a similarly long /o/ sound to emphasize the cumbersome movement of this new creature, as well as its steady progress toward the prophecy in the poem's conclusion:

> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
> The darkness drops again; but now I know
> That twenty centuries of stony sleep

The three long /ee/ sounds in line 19 ("twenty," "centuries," and "sleep") also emphasize the vast span of time that the line describes.

Finally, the poem's two last lines also use assonance. It comes through two more similar long vowel sounds, which first link the "hour" coming "round" to the beast's "Slouch[ing]" movement. Then, a slightly different /o/ sound makes this sense of inevitable movement even stronger, by making it clear that the beast is going "towards Bethlehem to be born."

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “u,” “i,” “u,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “i,” “y”
- **Line 2:** “a,” “o,” “a,” “o,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 5:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 6:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 8:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 10:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 11:** “o,” “o,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 12:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 13:** “y,” “i”
- **Line 15:** “a,” “a”
- **Line 16:** “o,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 17:** “o”
- **Line 18:** “o”
- **Line 19:** “y,” “ie,” “o,” “ee”
- **Line 21:** “ou,” “ou”
- **Line 22:** “ou,” “owa,” “o”

CAESURA

Caesura is used eight times in "The Second Coming," and it serves a variety of purposes.

The first example is in line 3. The first stanza, technically speaking, is one long sentence. Independent clauses unfold, but they all work together to build the picture of a gathering storm of chaos, confusion, and misery. The caesura in line 3 splits two very general and abstract sentences: "Things fall apart" and "the centre cannot hold." "Things" is deliberately vague, and both phrases state that these "things" are in the process of being destroyed. The caesura here is cleverly placed, because it is the first line in the poem in which the line's center itself cannot hold—the line is literally split into two just as the speaker talks about the weakening "centre" of the world.

The caesurae in lines 5 and 7 both help subtly to reinforce what the speaker is saying. The comma after "loosed" adds a bit of space to make the line itself feel looser, while the comma in line 7 develops the antithesis between the "best" people on one hand and the "worst" on the other.

The next caesura is in line 11, and it marks the poem's rhetorical height. Here, the speaker introduces their personal view into the poem. They state that, given the evidence presented in the first stanza, it must be high time for the "Second Coming." The repetition of the phrase in line 11, coupled with the exclamation point caesura, has an air of exasperation about it, as though the speaker finds it unbelievable (and perhaps upsetting) that the Second Coming hasn't yet arrived.

The caesurae in lines 16, 18, and 21 all serve a similar function, which is to create a sense within the lines of the ugly and cumbersome body of the beast from the speaker's vision. These caesurae prevent the lines from flowing too neatly or quickly, and in this way they build suspense and make the lines feel as heavy as the beast itself.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “;”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “!”
- **Line 13:** “:”

- **Line 16:** ","
- **Line 18:** ";"
- **Line 21:** ","

CONSONANCE

Consonance occurs often throughout "The Second Coming." In the first few lines, repeated /n/ sounds help evoke repeated and confused movements (think of how you might turn in circles if you were lost). The falcon and the falconer have lost track of one another:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

This repeated /n/ links the falcon and falconer with "anarchy" and the idea of a "centre" about to collapse. The alliterative consonance on /f/, /t/, and /th/ in those same lines also connect these ideas more closely.

The following two lines use a number of /d/ sounds, while also continuing the /n/ in some spots. Here, the speaker is trying to create a sense of the way that "innocence" has been overwhelmed, relating this to a "blood-dimmed tide," which hints at violent conflict and perhaps specifically at World War I. The numerous /d/ sounds start to overwhelm these two lines, literally flooding them with one sound to bring the image to sonic life:

> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

Interestingly, the poem revisits the /n/ sound again in the description of the speaker's vision. Having already linked the /n/ to "anarchy" and a failing "centre," the use of the same /n/ here suggests that this beast is also connected to this chaos and confusion. Instead of the heroic return of Jesus, this beast heralds a new era of death and destruction, as described in lines 13 through 15 (which are also brimming with sibilance):

> Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Then, the /d/ comes up again (as the /n/ continues) in lines 17 and 18, suggesting that the "blood-dimmed tide" really will overwhelm everything:

> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
> The darkness drops again; but now I know

Overall, then, consonance works throughout the poem to tie together seemingly different images and ideas, subtly indicating that there's no escaping the enormous shift that all of humanity is undergoing.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "T," "n," "n," "t," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 2:** "f," "n," "nn," "f," "n"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "f," "th," "n," "nn"
- **Line 4:** "n," "n ," "d"
- **Line 5:** "d," "d," "d," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 6:** "c," "n," "nn," "c," "n," "c," "d," "n," "d"
- **Line 7:** "ck," "ll," "c," "n," "w," "l," "w"
- **Line 8:** "ll," "n," "t," "n," "t," "n," "t"
- **Line 9:** "S," "s," "ti," "s"
- **Line 10:** "S," " S," "s"
- **Line 11:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "T," "s," "s," "t," "s," "n," "n," "s," "t"
- **Line 14:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 15:** "n," "n," "ss," "s," "s," "n"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s," "s," "l," "s," "l," "ll," "t," "t"
- **Line 17:** "l ," "d," "n," "d," "n," "n," "d," "d"
- **Line 18:** "d," "n," "ss," "d," "s," "n," "n," "kn"
- **Line 19:** "n," "c," "n," "s," "s," "n," "s"
- **Line 20:** " r," "r"
- **Line 21:** "t," "r," "b," "t," "t," "r," "r," "t," "t"
- **Line 22:** "t," "r," "B," "t," "b," "b," "r"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs several times throughout "The Second Coming," usually as a way of altering the poem's flow to reinforce its meaning.

The first instance of enjambment appears in line 1. Here, the phrase is lengthened over two lines to create the sense of something "widening" (growing more expansive).

The second instance of enjambment is at the end of line 5. Here, the speaker is describing a world overwhelmed by a "blood-dimmed tide," and the enjambment after "everywhere" makes it feel as though the line has spilled over into the next, much as the "tide" itself might do.

The most obvious instances of enjambment are in lines 11 to 20, in which six out of ten lines are enjambed. They help bring the speaker's vision to poetic life, with the phrases growing over the lines as if the imagined beast is too strong to be contained by the poem, as though it threatens to burst through the poem itself. The increase in enjambment also mimics the way in which the vision itself flows into the speaker's "inner sight." The vision comes on suddenly, awoken from humanity's collective unconscious (the "Spiritus Mundi"). The speaker here is overcome by the vision, so it dictates the phrase length as it spreads across these lines.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gyre"
- **Line 2:** "The"
- **Line 5:** "everywhere"
- **Line 6:** "The"
- **Line 7:** "worst"
- **Line 8:** "Are"
- **Line 11:** "out"
- **Line 12:** "When," "Mundi"
- **Line 13:** "Troubles," "desert"
- **Line 14:** "A"
- **Line 16:** "it"
- **Line 17:** "Reel"
- **Line 18:** "know"
- **Line 19:** "That," "sleep"
- **Line 20:** "Were"

EPISTROPHE

Epistrophe is used once in "The Second Coming," through the repeated "is at hand" at the ends of lines 9 and 10. These lines also use anaphora in the repeated "Surely" at the beginnings of the lines, making for two quite symmetrical lines.

Here, the speaker is introducing their own thoughts and feelings into the poem for the first time—or at least, this is where it starts to become obvious that the poem is coming from the speaker's subjective perspective. After the detached and measured tone of the first stanza, in which a pretty bleak and chaotic world is described in general but unsettling terms, the repetition marks a somewhat sudden shift into a less controlled, more personal tone. The rest of the second stanza continues with this new perspective, so the epistrophe helps set the reader up for what' s to come.

Additionally, saying "is at hand" twice emphasizes how near the speaker feels the Second Coming ought to be. However, the phrase (especially when repeated) also has an air of desperation about it. It's as though the speaker calls out for the Second Coming, insisting that it must be right around the corner, but receives only the following unsettling vision instead.

Where Epistrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "is at hand"
- **Line 10:** "is at hand"

METAPHOR

"The Second Coming" is a poem that relies heavily on metaphor and symbolism, but it doesn't always make it clear what its metaphors mean. Part of the poem's power is the way in which the metaphors *feel* significant, without being pinned down to a single particular interpretation.

The poem opens with a metaphor. Within a "widening gyre," a falcon and its falconer lose contact with one another. In other words, the falconer loses control (and loss of control is a repeated idea through the stanza). The falconer arguably represents humankind, and the falcon is humanity's civilization (and perhaps the natural world as well). As the rest of the stanza describes an increase in chaos and confusion—and the failure of the "best" people to take effective action—it seems like the falcon and the falconer are likely intended to represent this disconnect between people and the systems they ought to be in charge of. Again, however, the precise meaning remains ambiguous.

The "centre cannot hold" is a metaphor too, and it's just as vague as the preceding phrase ("things fall apart"). Perhaps this "centre" relates to the western Christian world (an interpretation that's supported by references to Christianity later on in the poem), and the weakening center is a metaphor for its imminent collapse. The "blood-dimmed tide," another metaphor, perhaps shows the reader exactly how this collapse might occur, and it's suggestive of some kind of mass death. As the poem was written soon after the First World War, the poem seems to be building a metaphorical argument that mankind has unleashed devastating forces that are now beyond its control.

The beast at the center of the speaker's vision is another metaphor. Like the opening metaphor of the falconer and falcon, it is an image of tension between humanity and the natural world—and it's also a literal embodiment of the connection between humankind ("the head of a man") and beasts ("lion body"). Perhaps, then, this metaphor signals that humankind was wrong to think it had civilized itself beyond its own animal nature—that despite its intellect, it is still a beast.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer;"
- **Line 3:** " the centre cannot hold;"
- **Line 5:** "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,"
- **Line 6:** "is drowned"
- **Lines 13-17:** "somewhere in sands of the desert / A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, / Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds."
- **Lines 20-22:** "Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, / And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

While poems often like to end at a kind of rhetorical height, "The Second Coming" concludes unusually—with a rhetorical question.

The question is as much for the reader as for the speaker: what beast will arrive in the Second Coming? Essentially, this question is about undermining the Christian narrative that Jesus will one day return and save humanity. The evidence presented in the first stanza makes it seem unlikely that humanity can be saved, and indeed the poem's overall suggestion seems to be that the Christian world is about to collapse.

What exactly this broader point means is hard to say—for example, the poem doesn't make any specific points about historical events, places, or people. In a way, though, that's the point. This poem isn't about specifics, but rather about grand historical changes that are perhaps hard to sense at the time (such the way that empires often fail to see their own destruction coming). The use of a question means that the poem ends on a kind of horror-movie cliffhanger, with some freakish beast just barely coming into view. This leaves the poem on a note of uncertainty, doubt, mystery and tension. Essentially, the poem is a poetic prophecy saying that something terrible is on its way. But as the rhetorical question suggests, the precise nature of that terror is anyone's guess.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 21-22:** "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

DIACOPE

Diacope first occurs in the very first line. Here, "turning" is repeated with only "and" for an intervening word. Part of the poem's set-up is to create picture of chaos, confusion, and disorientation. This almost immediate repetition, then, emphasizes the repetitive movement of the falcon, as it flies around haplessly in the "gyre" looking for the falconer.

Because of the diacope, the reader gets the sense that the "falcon" has been lost for a while—these are just two "turns," perhaps, of many. The repeat also emphasizes the movement of the "gyre." Put crudely, the gyre is a kind of grand historical force pictured as a spiral cone shape. As one gyre turns, another takes over (and this poem seems to present the gyre of Christianity giving way to whatever comes next). The two "turning[s]" create a sense of repeated rotation.

Another moment of diacope comes in lines 4 and 5 with the word "loosed." In line 4, "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," and in the subsequent line, "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed." Poets are often quite careful about their word choice, and frequently this means avoiding clunky repetitions of words. Here, Yeats seems to deliberately opt for a such a repetition in order to emphasize a sense of "looseness." As with elsewhere in the poem, the lines feel as though they can barely contain their content—such as the "anarchy" and overflowing bloodshed they describe.

Later, the phrase "the Second Coming" is also repeated in quick succession in lines 10 and 11. Saying this phrase two times very subtly reflects its content—this is the *second* coming after all, not the first. It also quite clearly draws readers' attention to this phrase. The speaker first mentions the approach of this "Second Coming" without much obvious fear, but then seems to realize the gravity of what this means—the "second" iteration of the phrase is accompanied by an exclamation mark signifying the speaker's sudden jolt of anxiety.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Turning," "turning"
- **Line 4:** "loosed"
- **Line 5:** "loosed"
- **Line 10:** "the Second Coming"
- **Line 11:** "The Second Coming"

VOCABULARY

Gyre (Line 1) - A *gyre* is a spiral cone shape and part of Yeats's complicated view of mysterious historical forces. As one gyre of history gives way, another one takes over. The concept of the gyre is discussed in more detail in Yeats's *A Vision*.

Falcon/Falconer (Line 2) - A falcon is a bird of prey. Falconry is the art of training a falcon to follow commands, originally for hunting purposes. The trainer is the falconer.

Anarchy (Line 4) - Anarchy here is meant as a state of sheer disorder.

Loosed (Line 4, Line 5) - Loosed here means "let loose."

Blood-dimmed (Line 5) - This means darkened by blood.

Revelation (Line 9) - A sudden divine or supernatural realization given to mankind.Here, it's also an allusion to the biblical book of Revelation—so it's also the speaker's way of saying something similar to line 10, that surely the "Second Coming" is near.

Second Coming (Line 10, Line 11) - The Second Coming is the Christian idea that Jesus will someday return to the earth and save those who are worthy.

Spiritus Mundi (Line 12) - This is Latin for "world spirit." Yeats believed that humanity has a collective unconscious, from which poets can draw powerful symbols and images. *Spiritus Mundi* is the term he used for this collective unconscious.

Pitiless (Line 15) - This means without pity.

Reel (Line 17) - Here, reel means to move around chaotically.

Indignant (Line 17) - This means angry and/or disturbed.

Vexed (Line 20) - This means annoyed, frustrated, or irritated.

Slouches (Line 22) - This relates to the beast's movement, suggesting that it is moving slowly, dragging along its heavy

weight.

Bethlehem (Line 22) - Christians believe that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the son of God. It is situated in the region that is today known as Palestine.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Second Coming" has two stanzas, with eight and fourteen lines respectively. The form does not fit any standard scheme. That said, both stanza bear a slight resemblance to the sonnet form (an octet followed by a sestet). The first stanza *is* an octet, and the second *does* have the same number of lines as a sonnet. This is pretty much where the similarities end, and it's hard to know whether Yeats intended the form as a gesture toward sonnets. If he did, perhaps this slight resemblance could be Yeats's way of suggesting a break with tradition ("the centre cannot hold"). Perhaps the poem strives to be contained in sonnet form, but the force of the vision and the beast itself are too much to contend with, so the form breaks down.

In terms of the two stanzas, they do serve very different functions. The first is written in an objective and measured tone, despite the "anarchy" and apparent misery it describes. In a way, it's like a news bulletin for the apocalypse.

The poem enters its second phase at the start of stanza two, when the speaker appeals to some absent authority. "Surely," the speaker says, the Second Coming is due (given the dire situation that's been outlined in the previous stanza). This new, more personal perspective marks a shift into the speaker's subjective voice, making it seem as though this second stanza is an individual commentary on the general facts of the first stanza. Then, the speaker is essentially interrupted by their own vision, and lines 13 to 17 spell that vision out in unsettling detail.

In line 18, the vision disappears, but the speaker is left with the vivid memory of it. Now, the speaker doesn't know the precise nature of what will happen in the future, but the speaker nonetheless senses that a significant shift in the world is coming—and it isn't going to be a good one. The poem thus ends on a note of doubt and fear, leaving the reader with the cliffhanger of the beast's slow approach.

METER

"The Second Coming" is written in blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter follows a ba BUM rhythm with five poetic feet, for a total of ten syllables per line. But in this poem, the regularity of the meter is constantly under threat, especially in the second stanza.

The first stanza is the much more measured—in tone and meter—of the two. Lines 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8—five out of eight lines—fit the metrical scheme well enough. But the poem in fact starts with metrical variation, hinting at the picture of chaos and confusion that is to come:

> Turning | and turn- | ing in | the wid- | ening gyre
> The fal- | con can- | not hear | the fal- | -coner;

The meter of both lines to a degree depends on how they are pronounced: whether "widening" and "falconer" are said with two or three syllables. Either way, the poem begins with a trochee instead of an iamb, and the possible extra syllables make the lines feel as though they are under metrical pressure. This effect is used to create an atmosphere of confusion, as though the lines *want* to be regular but have been destabilized.

The start of the second stanza has a similar effect, with trochees instead of iambs at the start of lines 9 and 10. This places extra emphasis on both instances of the word "Surely," reinforcing the speaker's exasperation at the apparent failure of the (Christian) Second Coming to arrive.

The most unstable section, metrically speaking, is the vision itself. Lines 13 through 17 contain some iambs, but the number of syllables per line varies wildly and the stresses are inconsistent. Here, it is as though the beast in the speaker's mind is testing the boundaries of the poem's cage, pushing and straining at the metrical edges:

> Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
> A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
> A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
> Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
> Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

Throughout, the tension between the regular meter and the frequent substitutions brings to life the sense of barely-contained chaos that the poem describes.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Second Coming" doesn't have a discernible rhyme scheme. The first four lines *almost* rhyme in couplets—"gyre"/"falconer" and "hold"/"world"—but not quite. Considering that the poem seeks to paint a picture of a chaotic world in which the "centre cannot hold," it makes sense that it doesn't employ strong end rhymes. A clear rhyme scheme would probably suggest order and pattern, rather than disorder and array, so the lack of rhyme underscores just how broken this world of "anarchy" really is.

Technically speaking, lines 9 and 10 rhyme, but that is because they end in the same word. This is an example of epistrophe, emphasizing how close the speaker feels the Second Coming is—or rather, how close they feel it *ought* to be, given the chaos portrayed in the first stanza.

SPEAKER

The identity of the speaker is not specified in "The Second Coming." However, the poem does offer a few clues as to speaker's perspective.

First, it's important to notice the clear difference in tone between stanza 1 and stanza 2. The opening stanza has no intervention that makes the speaker's role obvious—there are no first-person pronouns, nor do there seem to be any subjective opinions expressed. The first stanza reads more like a kind of weird news bulletin, listing all the chaos, confusion, and misery in the world (and doing so only in the most general terms). The only thing that suggests that the first stanza may not be entirely objective is the use of the word "gyre," which is a mystical/philosophical idea from Yeats's own "System" (which, for those interested, is outlined in Yeats's *A Vision*).

The second stanza begins with an important shift in the speaker's role in the poem. Suddenly, the speaker is introducing their own subjective opinion, crying out that it must "surely" be time for "revelation" and the "Second Coming." Indeed, the repeated "surely" and "Second Coming" suggest an air of desperation, which is reinforced by the exclamation mark caesura of line 11. In lines 13 through 18, the speaker receives an image from the world's collective unconscious ("Spiritus Mundi"). This vision seems to be a premonition, which the speaker then comments on in lines 18 through 22, ending on a grim note as the beast from the vision makes its way toward reality.

The speaker is thus a kind of visionary, someone who can interpret the chaos of the first stanza and offer some clue about what it means (even though much of its meaning remains a mystery). The speaker also seems to have some alignment with the Christian moral and mythical framework, and it is the collapse of the Christian world ("twenty centuries of stony sleep") that they seem to foresee.

SETTING

The setting in "The Second Coming" is deliberately disorientating and abstract, in the first stanza at least.

The poem opens with a metaphorical image—the separated falcon and falconer—within a "widening gyre." This "gyre" is more of a philosophical idea than a concrete location, meaning that the poem's opening is quite difficult to place. Indeed, according to Yeats's own beliefs, these "gyres" are huge spiral shapes that represent the major movements of history (e.g. "twenty centuries" of Christianity), and so accordingly the setting is as generic as simply "the world." The rest of the stanza builds this general sense of "anarchy," chaos, and misery, but it resists tying it to one place or time.

The poem was, of course, written just after the end of World War I, so it's easy to read the early 20th century into the poem too. The mention of "twenty centuries" also seems to confirm that this *is* the 20th century (twenty centuries after the birth of Jesus Christ), even if it's a nightmarish and abstract version of it.

The setting in the second stanza gets more specific but even weirder. The reader is suddenly brought into the subjective experience of the speaker, who in turn is receiving a vision from the *Spiritus Mundi* (Yeats's term for humanity's collective unconscious). This vision is situated in a barren, inhospitable desert. Eventually, the speaker comes out of this vision and imagines the beast (or perhaps another similarly nightmarish one) in a new location: the path to Bethlehem. According to Christianity, Bethlehem was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, and in geographic terms, it's located in modern-day Palestine.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Along with Seamus Heaney, William Butler Yeats is one of Ireland's most prominent poets. He was born in 1865 and began writing around the age of seventeen, and this poem appears in his 1921 collection, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. Yeats's influences were wide and diverse, including the English Romantics—figures such as Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats—and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud. Irish mythology and folklore were also especially formative of his work, particularly given his desire for Ireland's political independence from the England.

Yeats was also interested in mysticism and the occult. This poem demonstrates that interest, using the "gyre" image that Yeats discusses in *A Vision*, a wide-ranging book that outlines Yeats's "System" (a complicated mix of different philosophies and cultural ideas). Yeats believed in a kind of collective unconscious of humankind (the "Spiritus Mundi"), from which powerful (but not necessarily easy to understand) images and symbols could be gathered by poets. His wife at the time, Georgie Hyde-Lees, was instrumental in this aspect of Yeats's work, acting as a psychic channel through which Yeats believed he could find spiritually valid poetic ideas.

Additionally, there is one key literary influence running through this poem from start to finish: the biblical Book of Revelation (and the Bible more generally). In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is predicted to return to the Earth (in what's called "The Second Coming") and usher in a new era of peace, joy, and union with God. This poem is a kind of perversion of that story, seeing a bizarre beast in place of the expected hero. The author of the Book of Revelation names himself as John of Patmos, but the book's genuine authorship and its relationship to the rest of the Bible are the subject of much scholarly debate. The book itself

is full of surreal imagery and prophecy and well worth a read.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though "The Second Coming" deliberately avoids being too specific about its setting, most critics see the date of composition as significant. It was written soon after the end of World War I, during which millions of people died in battle and millions more from its fallout. This immense devastation was a stark reminder of humanity's capacity for self-destruction. Indeed, some people see the poem as an eery prediction of World War II, in part because Adolf Hitler so clearly matches the poem's idea of the "worst" people who are "full of passionate intensity."

But the historical context as actually presented by the poem is much more ambiguous. In its discussion of what looks like an end-of-the-world scenario, the poem is partly a work of eschatology—that is, writing about the apocalypse. As such, the poem joins a historical tradition that stretches back thousands of years. Indeed, an Assyrian clay tablet dated around 2800 BC talks of a "degenerate Earth" showing "signs that the world is speedily coming to an end."

Despite its lack of specifics, the poem is definitely grounded in Christian theology and history. The "Second Coming," though not an idea exclusive to Christianity, is definitely strongly associated with that religion. Indeed, the "twenty centuries" of line 19 and the mention of Bethlehem seem to confirm the poem's ties to Christianity, as both refer to the birth of Jesus Christ.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Yeats and the Supernatural — A clip discussing Yeats, faeries, and Irish occult tradition. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcqKe3e3ze4)
- A Reading of the Poem — Dominic West (of The Wire fame) reads the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QI40j17EFbI)
- The Second Coming in Popular Culture — An interesting article outlining the poem's quotability. (https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/07/no-slouch/)
- Yeats's Vision — A website dedicated to exploring and understanding the heady text Yeats wrote about his view of the world. (http://www.yeatsvision.com)
- Yeats's Voice — In this clip, Yeats reads one of his most famous poems in his distinctive tone. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLlcvQg9i6c)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS POEMS

- When You Are Old

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